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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between individual personality characteristics and the threat of nuclear war among 192 introductory psychology students at a small college in the Pacific Northwest. One measure of nuclear threat perception was spontaneous concern, which was assessed using five presentations each of the incomplete sentences, "I worry about. . ." and "One of my fears regarding the futures is . . .." Three more measures of threat perception were obtained from a modified world affairs questionnaire. The relationships between these perceptions and selected personality traits were consistent with many of the expectations held by psychologists regarding the impact of nuclear war. The perception of nuclear war as a higher probability event was associated with lower general self-esteem, lower evaluations of one's emotional stability, lower self-control, and a lowered sense of well-being. Spontaneous expression of concern about nuclear war was also related to lower general self-esteem. The roles of authoritarian personality and conservatism are also mentioned in terms of Lifton's (1980) discussion of denial and what he calls "nuclearism." (Author/IS)

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Personality Correlates of Nuclear War Threat Perception[1]

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[1]Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, San Jose, California, April 20, 1985

ABSTRACT

The threat of nuclear war has been postulated to effect one's self-concept and other personality constructs. Because of methodological difficulties in manipulating the nuclear threat, this descriptive study investigated the correlates of the perception of the threat of nuclear annihilation. Respondents were introductory psychology students at a small college in the Pacific Northwest. One measure of nuclear threat perception was spontaneous concern which was assessed using five presentations each of the incomplete sentences "I worry about . . ." and "One of my fears regarding the future is . . .". Three more direct measures of threat perception included in the study were summated ratings of items from three factors of a modified world affairs questionnaire. The correlational relationships between these perceptions and selected personality traits were consistent with many of the expectations held by psychologists regarding the impact of the nuclear threat. The perception of nuclear war as a higher probability event was associated with lower general self-esteem, lower evaluations of one's emotional stability, lower self-control, and a lowered sense of well-being. Spontaneous expression of concern about nuclear war was also related to lower general self-esteem. The role of authoritarian personality and conservatism are discussed in terms of Lifton's nuclearism.

The contemplation of our world during and after a global nuclear war can result in horrifying visions of mass destruction and wholesale human suffering. The images created for readers by Jonathan Schell in his classic book, The Fate of the Earth, are easily described as visions of a holocaust of immense proportions. Yet even Schell's descriptions of a possible nuclear war do not do justice to new data predicting the additional horrors of nuclear winter (Turco, Toon, Ackerman, Pollack and Sagan 1983).

Beardslee and Mack (1982) found the majority of their researched sample were aware of the possibility of nuclear war by the age of twelve. Psychological research indicates that a sizable portion of children, adolescents and adults are concerned and worried to some degree about the everpresent nuclear threat (e.g., Schwebel, 1963, 1965, 1982; Escalona, 1965, 1982; Beardslee and Mack, 1982; Mayton, 1984a; Kramer, Kalick and Milburn, 1983). Elder (1965) suggested this "possibility of thermonuclear war and all the attendent cold war tensions should produce a high incidence and large variety of emotional responses (p. 120)."

The threat of nuclear war has been postulated to adversely effect one's self concept and related constructs because of the realized uncertainty of one's future. Escalona (1982) predicts the nuclear threat to have indirect effects on the development of the child's potential ego strengths and weaknesses. Beardslee and Mack (1982, 1983) refer to the potential detrimental effects on an adolescent's healthy ego ideal. Dodds (1983) has presented a model of how children's reactions to a nuclear threat effects their consolidation of sense of self.

Several other traits and personality variables are hypothesized to be effected by the threat of nuclear war. The reality of the nuclear threat is predicted to create powerlessness (Escalona, 1982), helplessness (Schwebel, 1982; Dodds, 1983), and cynicism (Escalona, 1982). Thus, locus of control is implicated as a relevant personality construct. Egocentric personality orientations are also postulated as resulting from the perceived threat in terms of more here and now, present-oriented responses (Escalona, 1982; Beardslee and Mack, 1982, 1983), increased narcissism (Schwebel, 1982), and lowered ability to delay gratification (Beardslee and Mack, 1983). Another trait which has been discussed is restlessness (Schwebel, 1982). Authoritarian personality has been discussed as a variable which moderates attitudes toward the nuclear threat (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1964). In the same vein Elder (1965) has discussed intelligence as a potential moderator variable.

Considering the potentially extreme nature of the fear and worry resulting from one's thinking about nuclear war, it is logical to anticipate severe emotional reactions requiring psychotherapeutic treatment. Lay media have implied that the nuclear threat has been responsible for increased teenage suicide rates and increased drug abuse. Yet Beardslee and Mack (1983) were unable to locate any attempts in the psychological literature to demonstrate diagnosable psychopathology resulting from the threat of nuclear war. In fact the data to support any of the above mentioned relationships between the realized nuclear threat and personality constructs has been very limited. Anecdotal reports, interviews with unrepresentative samples and clinical intuition comprise nearly all the evidence that the

threat of nuclear war does impact on an individual's personality makeup. While the consistency of these data and the logic for these expected relationships has been impressive, the methodological limitations preclude strong statements of known validity to this point (Divoky 1983; Beardslee and Mack 1983).

The development of unambiguious research strategies to assess the psychological effects of the threat of nuclear war is frought with complexities and is not a straightforward proposition. Elder (1965) anticipated the difficult process to identify and evaluate these effects due to the unusual nature of the situation. In discussing the developmental impact of knowledge of the threat of a nuclear holocoust on children, Dodds (1983) points out the difficulty in finding groups of American children who have grown up with and without the threat of nuclear war. Because of the pervasive nature of this threat, comparability between groups on age, social, cultural and other demographic variables is near impossible. Thus standard developmental studies comparing intact groups are not feasible. Standard experimental methodology would require a treatment group exposed to the nuclear threat (and the anxiety and fear provoking images which it conjures) and a control group which is not. Defining an American or European subject pool which is naive to the possibilities of nuclear war so that random assignment to the experimental groups could be made is either impossible or would have serious population validity problems. Another complexity involves the lack of valid models for understanding the impact of responses to domestic politics and threatening international realities on long-term functioning and personality development (Beardslee and Mack, 1983).

Given the serious implications the threat of nuclear war is postulated to have psychologically, attempts must be made to study this problem from many different points of view. This descriptive study was designed to determine the relationships between selected personality variables which have been tentatively described as responses to the nuclear threat in the reviewed literature. The documentation of correlational relationships is an important first step in researching the psychological effects of the threat of nuclear war as these relationships are necessary conditions for causality to exist. Knowledge of significant associations can aid in building models to assess the impact of the nuclear threat in more elaborate research designs. Since exposure to the threat of nuclear anniliation can not be manipulated for reasons already discussed, this research followed the recommendation of Dodds (1983) and made the perception of this threat the key independent variable.

Based on the reviewed literature, it is expected that the perception of a nuclear threat will be significantly associated with an individual's self-concept, locus of control, egocentricism, authoritarian personality characteristics and intelligence. Specifically it is hypothesized that persons with higher levels of perception will manifest lower self-concepts, more external locus of control, higher levels of egocentricism, fewer authoritarian personality characteristics, and higher intellectual efficiency.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects for this study were volunteers from an introduction to psychology class at a small, state-supported college in the Pacific Northwest. A total of 102 completed the questionnaires and received partial credit toward their grade for their participation. The sample included 38 males and 63 females between the ages of 17 and 49 with median and mean ages of 19 and 22.2 respectively.

Procedure

The independent variable, perception of the threat of nuclear war, was operationally defined in four ways. First, the expression of spontaneous concern about nuclear war was assessed using five presentations each of the incomplete sentences "I worry about . . ." and "One of my fears regarding the future is . . .". Spontaneous concern was defined as a dicotomous variable with those mentioning nuclear war or a related term classified as concerned and those not mentioning nuclear war for any of the ten incomplete sentences classified as nonconcerned. As in an earlier study (Mayton, 1984a), this variable was assessed first without any reference to nuclear war issues to avoid contamination of the responses. The remaining three measures of perception of the nuclear threat were measured as summated ratings across three factors of the modified world affairs questionnaire (MWAQ) developed by Mayton (1984b). The three factors were labeled as (1)

probability of nuclear war, (2) destructiveness, and (3) civil defense and consisted of four, four and five items, respectively. High scores on the probability factor denote views that nuclear war is very probable and it occupies the individual's thoughts regularly. Increased degrees of worry and a higher incidence of nuclear war nightmare are also associated with high scores on this probability factor. High scores on the destructiveness factor indicate a denial of the amount of destruction a nuclear exchange would incur and that a better world is possible after a nuclear war when the Communist menace is ended. High scores on the civil defense factor indicate a perception that civil defense programs can reduce casualties and save a majority of lives.

The dependent variable self concept was operationally defined as scores on Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and the thirteen subtest scores for a multidimensional self-concept inventory developed and validated by Herbert Marsh and his associates (Marsh, Barnes and Hovecar, 1983; Marsh and O'Neill, 1984; Shavelson and Marsh, 1984). The Rosenberg scale assesses general self-esteem with low scores indicating a more positive response. The Marsh inventory is scored so that high scores indicate a more positive response. The subtests are summated ratings over ten to twelve questions each and assess one's self-concept related to (1) math, (2) verbal, (3) general academic, (4) problem solving, (5) physical ability, (6) physical appearance, (7) relations with same sex, (8) relations with opposite sex, (9) relations with parents, (10) religion/spirituality, (11) honesty, (12) emotional stability, and (13) general self. The two additional self concept related measures used in this study were the sense of well being subtest score from the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) developed by Gough (1964) and the scores

for the social interest scale developed by Crandall (1980). This latter scale was added specifically because of the match between its psychodynamic orientation and the psychodynamic nature of certain self-concept references in the reviewed literature.

The remaining dependent variables were operationally defined as scores in several different categories. Locus of control was defined as scores on Rotter's (1966) scale with high scores indicating more external orientations. Egocentric orientations were defined by higher scores on the CPI subscale of self-acceptance and by low scores on the CPI self-control subscale. Restlessness was defined as higher scores on the CPI communality scale. Authoritarian personality characteristics were assessed using the CPI tolerance scale with lower scores indirectly associated with more authoritarian characteristics. The potential moderating variable of intelligence was assessed indirectly through the CPI intellectual efficiency scale. Another potential moderating variable was conservatism as defined by a score on the scale discussed by Poulton, Beier and Clark (1983). This variable was included for exploratory reasons. The remaining scales on the CPI were also included for exploratory reasons as either potential moderators or effects of the perceived threat of nuclear war.

All of the data were collected during the spring semester of 1984. The independent variables were assessed during the first week of the semester during class time. The dependent measures were assessed between the fourth and twelfth week in the college testing center as part of a separate project related to personality. Based on debriefing activities the two aspects of this study were not perceived to be related by the respondents.

RESULTS

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between the four measures of nuclear war threat perception and the 23 measures of personality characteristics postulated to be related to this threat. These correlations are presented in Table 1. While only twelve of the 72 values are statistically significant, this is distinctly more than the four expected to be significant based on chance fluctuations. All values are relatively low in magnitude with absolute values of the significant coefficients ranging from .17 to .26.

Insert Table 1 About Here

For the self-concept construct measures significant correlations were found between selected perception variables and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, Marsh's verbal self-concept, Marsh's problem solving self concept, Marsh's emotional stability self concept, Crandall's Social Interest Scale and CPI sense of well-being. As predicted, low levels of general self esteem as measured by the Rosenberg scale were associated with perceptions of higher probabilities of nuclear war and increased concern and worry about it. Conversely, high levels of general self-esteem were associated with lower probability perception and decreased concern and worry about nuclear war. In a similar fashion lower emotional stability self concept and a lower sense of well-being were associated with a higher probability perception and vice versa. High emotional stability self concept was also associated with the perception that nuclear war will not be as destructive as many think.

Those less likely to deny the destructive capabilities of nuclear war exhibited lower emotional stability self concept. Unexpectedly, Marsh's verbal self concept scale was positively correlated with an individual's spontaneous expression of concern. In addition high values on Marsh's problem solving self concept were associated with perceptions of nuclear war being more probable and lower problem solving self concept was associated with lower probability perceptions. The perception of civil defense activities as effective in reducing casualties was significantly associated with higher levels of social interest and lower levels of well being.

Locus of control was positively correlated with the civil defense perception factor. Persons who viewed civil defense activities as effective in reducing casualties were more external in their locus of control while persons who perceived civil defense efforts as ineffectual were more internal. The only egocentric construct which correlated with any of the nuclear war threat perception variables was CPI Self-Control. Respondents who perceived a higher probability of nuclear war exhibited lower CPI self-control scores. Restlessness as measured indirectly by CPI communality scores was significantly correlated with the spontaneous expression of concern. Persons with low scores on CPI communality tend to be seen as impatient, disorderly, and restless and they expressed less concern about the nuclear threat.

Each of the three personality variables which were postulated to moderate an individual's perception of the threat of nuclear war correlated with one measure of this perception. Higher scores on CPI intellectual efficiency and on CPI tolerance were associated with lower scores on the civil defense factor. Respondents with higher levels of

intellectual efficiency and tolerance were less likely to perceive civil defense as effective. Persons with lower intellectual efficiency and more authoritarian personality characteristics tended to perceive civil defense activities as more effective. Conservatism scale scores were positively correlated with the destructiveness denial factor. The more conservative a respondent scored the more likely agreement was made to the notion that nuclear war won't be as destructive as many think.

The remaining California Psychological Inventory were correlated with the four nuclear threat perception variables for exploratory reasons. The remaining significant correlations ($p < .05$) along with the significant correlations previously discussed are presented in Table 2. CPI Femininity significantly correlated negatively with spontaneous concern about nuclear war. Higher levels of femininity being associated with less concern. CPI psychological mindedness also correlated negatively with the probability perception factor. Those viewing nuclear war as a higher probability event tended to respond in ways indicating less interest in and less responsiveness to the inner needs of others. CPI sociability significantly correlated in the negative direction with both the destructiveness denial and the civil defense perception factors. Respondents with perceptions of higher levels of destructiveness of nuclear and a lowered level of effectiveness for civil defense tended to express more outgoing and sociable responses. Perception of civil defense as less effective was also associated with higher capacity for status and higher levels of motivation in settings where antonomy and independence are positive behaviors.

Insert Table 2 About Here

A stepwise regression analysis was computed to predict each of the nuclear war threat perception variables using the SPSSX statistical package using all measured personality constructs as predictor variables. Of particular concern was the generation of the multiple correlation coefficients and the coefficients of determination. For each of the four perception of the nuclear threat variables, the significant predictors, beta weights, R and R^2 are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 About Here

As can be seen in Table 3, the multiple correlation coefficients ranged from .41 to .50. Each set of predictors accounted for 17% to 25% of the variance in perception of the threat of nuclear war.

DISCUSSION

The correlational relationships between the perception of the threat of nuclear war and the personality constructs hypothesized to be effected by this threat were not large but many were significant in the predicted direction. The college students in this study who spontaneously expressed concern about the nuclear threat did tend to have lower general self-esteem. The perception of nuclear war as a higher probability event was also associated with lower general self-esteem, as well as lower evaluations of one's emotional stability, lower self-control and a lower sense of well-being. The more destructive nuclear war is perceived to be, the lower the self evaluation of one's emotional stability. While correlational relationships do not validate the causal implications made by Escalona (1982), Schwebel (1982),

Beardslee and Mack (1982, 1983) and Dodds (1983), these are necessary conditions for the validation of these relationships. Longitudinal data beginning with elementary age children seems warranted and positively supported by these findings.

The correlational findings do in fact indicate some curious complexities. Increased expression of concern is associated with higher self concept regarding one's verbal skills and with personality scores associated with dependable, moderate, tactful and reliable behavior. Perhaps the verbal ability and the good judgement allows some to avoid the nuclear numbing and the use of the defense mechanism of denial as elucidated by Lifton (1980, 1982). In so doing they are able to express their fears and concerns. The association between the perception that a nuclear war is very probable and higher evaluations of one's problem-solving abilities might be interpreted in a similar fashion.

Perhaps the association between the perception of our civil defense as effective with more social interest, lower sense of well-being, and more external locus of control signifies the tendency to succumb to denial and the nuclear numbing. Crandall (1980) has discussed social interest as an aid to counteract feelings of loneliness and helplessness in a potentially hostile world. He also found positive associations of social interest with the ability to cope with stress and with stability of self-appraisal following failure. Higher levels of social interest possibly help one cope with the potential hostilities of a nuclear conflict by allowing one to put more faith into the civil defense system. A lowered sense of well-being is associated with both the higher probability of nuclear war and the higher levels of effectiveness for the civil defense. One explanatory scenario might be that

well-being is adversely effected by higher probability perceptions and this lowered sense of well-being predisposes one to deny the severity of this threat by inflating one's perception of the effectiveness of civil defense activities.

As hypothesized, the perception of the threat of nuclear war was associated with authoritarian personality characteristics. This verifies the earlier predictions made by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1964). The authoriarian concepts of ethnocentricism and a general lack of tolerance are associated with a stronger belief in the effectiveness of our civil defense. Further study of this relationship may indicate an additional predisposition toward nuclearism. According to Lifton (1980) nuclearism is "the passionate embrace of nuclear weapons as a solution to death and a way of restoring a lost sense of immortality" (p. 119). He goes on to indicate that nuclearism involves the use of the power of the technological deity of nuclear weapons to obtain salvation and keep the world functioning properly. Another finding which can possibly be linked to Lifton's nuclearism is conservatism as it relates to the perception of destructiveness. More conservative respondents expressed more beliefs denying the destructiveness of a potential nuclear war along with stronger adherence to the belief that a better world is possible after a nuclear war when the Communist menace is ended. Given the emergence of the political new right along with increased defense spending and the administration's open lobbying for new weapons in the face of new arems control talks, the link between conservatism and nuclearism seems even less tenuous.

The relationships between a person's perception of the threat of

nuclear war and selected personality constructs have been shown to be consistent with many of the expectations held by psychologists and psychiatrists concerned with the impact of the nuclear threat. Keeping in mind that the correlation coefficients are relatively small in magnitude and longitudinal studies are needed to validate the causal direction of the found relationships, the general findings are encouraging nonetheless. If the nuclear threat does effect the self concept of individuals adversely, these findings indicate it does so in terms of one's general self-esteem and evaluations of one's emotional stability and well-being. Other dimensions of self-concept such as one's verbal skill and problem solving skill evaluations appear to need to be higher before concern about the threat is expressed or realized without denial. The role of authoritarian personality constructs and conservatism were discussed in relation to the nuclearism of Lifton (1980). The interpretations provided are hoped to be fruitful for future researchers in this timely field of study and to stimulate comprehensive model building. The area of causal modeling would seem to be an appropriate avenue for this pursuit.

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Table 1

Correlations of Nuclear Threat Perception and Postulated Personality Correlates

Personality Variable	MWAQ Nuclear Threat Perception Factors: Spontaneous Concern	Probability	Destructiveness	Civil Defense
SELF CONCEPT CONSTRUCTS				
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	.18*	.21*	.08	.08
Marsh Math SC	.00	.03	.07	.04
Marsh Verbal SC	.26**	.13	-.08	.13
Marsh General Academic SC	.03	-.08	-.03	.05
Marsh Problem Solving SC	.07	.18*	.06	-.04
Marsh Physical Ability SC	.06	.01	-.11	-.11
Marsh Physical Appearance SC	-.16	-.01	.12	.09
Marsh Relations/Same Sex SC	.03	.06	-.06	.12
Marsh Relations/Opposite Sex SC	-.14	-.04	-.02	.04
Marsh Relations/Parents SC	-.08	-.08	.14	.04
Marsh Religion/Spirituality SC	.05	.03	.09	.01
Marsh Honesty SC	.00	-.15	-.03	-.02
Marsh Emotional Stability SC	-.01	-.25**	.17*	-.12
Marsh General Self Concept	-.14	-.11	.02	.01
Crandall's Social Interest	.07	.02	.13	.20*
CPI Sense of Well Being	-.05	-.21*	.01	-.18*
LOCUS OF CONTROL				
Rotter's Locus of Control	.09	-.03	-.00	.17*
EGOCENTRISM CONSTRUCTS				
CPI Self-Acceptance	.01	-.07	-.12	-.16
CPI Self-Control	-.11	-.19*	.02	-.09
RESTLESSNESS				
CPI Communality	.19*	-.07	-.16	.07
CPI Tolerance	-.06	-.10	-.00	-.32**
CPI Intellectual Efficiency	.15	.01	-.08	-.23*
Conservatism	-.03	-.09	.27**	-.02

* significant at the .05 level
** significant at the .01 level

Table 2

Significant Personality Correlates of the Perception of the Nuclear Threat

Nuclear War Perception	Personality Correlates	r
Expressed spontaneous concern about nuclear war. (Spontaneous Concern)	Rosenberg Self Esteem	.18
	Marsh-Verbal Self Concept	.26
	CPI Communality	.19
	CPI Femininity	-.17
Nuclear war is very probable and individual worries about it. (Probability Factor)	Rosenberg Self Esteem	.21
	Marsh-Problem Solving Self-Concept	.18
	Marsh-Emotional Stability Self-Concept	-.25
	CPI Sense of Well Being	-.21
	CPI Self Control	-.19
	CPI Psychological Mindedners	-.25
Nuclear war won't be as destructive as many think. (Destructiveness Factor)	Marsh-Emotional Stability Self-Concept	.17
	CPI Sociability	-.18
	Conservatism	.27
Civil defense activities will significantly reduce casualities. (Civil Defense Factor)	Rotter's Locus of Control	.17
	Crandall's Social Interest	.20
	CPI - Sense of Well Being	-.18
	CPI - Capacity for Status	-.24
	CPI - Sociability	-.21
	CPI - Tolerance	-.32
	CPI - Achievement Via Independence	-.28
	CPI - Intellectual Efficiency	-.23

Table 3

Stepwise Regression Analyses for Nuclear Threat Perception Variables

Nuclear Threat Perception	Personality Predictors	BETA	R	R^2
Spontaneous Concern	Marsh Verbal Self Concept	.345	.50	.25
	Marsh General Self Concept	-.214		
	CPI Communality	.234		
	CPI Femininity	-.214		
	CPI Sociability	-.212		
High Probability of Nuclear War Factor	CPI Psychological Mindedness	-.349	.41	.17
	Marsh Problem-Solving Self-Concept	.294		
Destructiveness Denial Factor	Conservatism	.273	.41	.17
	CPI Sociability	-.323		
	CPI Good Impression	.231		
Effective Civil Defense Perception Factor	CPI Tolerance	-.456	.47	.22
	Crandall's Social Interest	.259		
	CPI Socialization	.204		